



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

NEWS RELEASE

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Department of Health Continues Investigation of Hepatitis C Cases in Ward County

BISMARCK, N.D. – The North Dakota Department of Health is continuing to investigate a cluster of Hepatitis C virus (HCV) cases in Ward County. In August, the Department of Health reported that three cases had been identified. Since then, an additional four cases were tested by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and were found to be genetically linked to the first three. This may indicate that there is a common source for these infections. In addition, testing found 28 more people who were antibody positive for Hepatitis C. Those samples have been sent to the CDC and the Department of Health is waiting for the test results. Additional testing is continuing and may reveal more cases.

“As part of the investigation, we look for what cases have in common that might put them at risk for exposure. As risk factors are identified, we will be notifying those people to refer them in for testing,” said Kirby Kruger, director of the Division of Disease Control for the North Dakota Department of Health. “It’s important to remember that hepatitis C is not spread through the air, but instead through blood, and it is not spread easily. At this point, we do not believe the general population to be at risk for hepatitis C related to this outbreak. If you are not notified, there is no recommended action to take.”

All of the cases involve people who are 60 years of age or older and have complicated health histories. All of the cases involve either former or current residents of ManorCare Health Services in Minot, although how or where people are being infected is not known at this time. Officials from ManorCare are assisting the Department of Health and the CDC in this investigation.

“The initial part of this investigation focused on testing people to determine the extent of infection and to help provide some direction to the investigation,” said Kruger. “The focus will now be on trying to uncover how the virus is being spread”

Hepatitis C investigations are often complicated because it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to determine how long a person has been infected.

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Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis C can lead to lifelong (chronic) infection and can cause serious liver damage (cirrhosis or liver cancer) and death. About 80 percent of people infected with HCV have mild or no signs or symptoms initially. Symptoms may include tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea, abdominal discomfort, vomiting, dark urine or jaundice (i.e., yellowing of skin or whites of eyes). Some people recover fully, but 55 percent to 85 percent of infected people carry the virus in their blood for a lifetime and develop chronic infection.

People can become infected primarily through blood-to-blood contact or more rarely by sexual contact. In general, the following groups are at an increased risk for hepatitis C and are recommended for testing:

- Current or past injection drug users – even if a person injected just once in their life
- Recipients of clotting factors (products given to help blood clot) made before 1987
- Hemodialysis patients
- Recipients of blood and/or solid organs before 1992
- Infants born to infected mothers
- Individuals who receive tattoos or body piercings from an unregulated entity
- Baby boomers born between 1945 and 1965 who have never been tested

People who have hepatitis C should remain aware that their blood and possibly other body fluids are potentially infective. Care should be taken to avoid blood exposure to others by not sharing toothbrushes, razors, needles or any other objects that may have become contaminated with blood. In addition, infected people must not donate blood and should inform their health-care providers so that proper health care can be provided.

For more information, contact Tracy Miller, North Dakota Department of Health, at 701.328.2378. Information about HCV can be found by visiting www.ndhealth.gov/disease/Hepatitis/.

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